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United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL)

Since 1978, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) has been deployed in the Lebanon-Israel-Syria triborder area. The formal boundaries dividing the three countries remain disputed. The United States has supported UNIFIL financially and diplomatically with the aim of bolstering and expanding the authority of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in UNIFIL's operating area (see **Figure 1**) in southern Lebanon, a region historically dominated by Hezbollah (also spelled Hizballah).

Evolution of UNIFIL Mandate

UNIFIL's initial mandate was to confirm the withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon, restore peace and security, and assist the Lebanese government in restoring its authority in southern Lebanon (a traditionally Shi'a area that became a Hezbollah stronghold in the 1980s). In May 2000, Israel withdrew its forces from southern Lebanon. The following month, the United Nations identified a 120 km interim boundary line between Lebanon and Israel to use as a reference for the purpose of confirming the withdrawal of Israeli forces. The Line of Withdrawal, commonly known as the Blue Line, is not an international border demarcation between the two states.

Following the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war, U.N. Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701 (2006) increased UNIFIL's troop ceiling and expanded its mandate to include monitoring the cessation of hostilities between the two sides, accompanying and supporting the LAF as they deployed throughout southern Lebanon, and helping ensure humanitarian access to civilian populations. UNSCR 1701 authorized UNIFIL to assist the Lebanese government in the establishment of "an area free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the Government of Lebanon and of UNIFIL" between the Blue Line and the Litani River, which UNIFIL defines as its area of operations (see **Figure 1**). UNSCR 1701 also calls upon the government of Lebanon to secure its borders and asks UNIFIL "to assist the Government of Lebanon at its request."

Implementation of UNSCR 1701

According to UNIFIL, "Any unauthorized crossing of the Blue Line by land or by air from any side constitutes a violation of Security Council resolution 1701." Since 2007, UNIFIL has worked with Lebanese and Israeli authorities to mark the Blue Line on the ground via 272 blue barrels, a contested process that stalled in 2017 and remains unfinished. UNIFIL continues to monitor violations of UNSCR 1701, and the U.N. Secretary-General reports regularly to the U.N. Security Council on the implementation of UNSCR 1701. These reports have listed violations by Hezbollah, such as the construction of underground tunnels that cross beneath the Blue Line, as

well as violations by Israel, such as regular incursions into Lebanese airspace.

Figure 1. UNIFIL Area of Operations



Sources: Created by CRS. Boundaries from ESRI and U.S. State Department.

Note: UNDOF = United Nations Disengagement Observer Force.

Size and Structure

UNIFIL is headquartered in the Lebanese town of Naqoura, 14 miles south of Tyre. Its leadership rotates among troop-contributing states; since 2018 UNIFIL has been led by Major General Stefano Del Col (Italy). As of August 2021, UNIFIL deploys approximately 10,300 troops from 46 countries in a 1060 square km zone roughly a third the size of Rhode Island. The largest troop contributing countries are Italy, Indonesia, Nepal, Ghana, and India. (U.S. forces do not participate in UNIFIL). UNIFIL also has a civilian staff of roughly 800. UNIFIL's mandate falls under Chapter VI of the U.N. Charter, which allows for the use of force primarily in self-defense, rather than Chapter VII, which would enable enforcement by military means. Since 1978, UNIFIL has reported 323 fatalities. Three-quarters of reported fatalities occurred prior to 2000.

Maritime Task Force

Since the discovery in 2009 of large offshore gas fields in the Mediterranean, unresolved issues over the demarcation of Lebanon's land border with Israel have resulted in disputes over maritime boundaries, and in 2011 Lebanese authorities called on the U.N. to establish a maritime

equivalent of the Blue Line. U.N. officials stated that UNIFIL does not have the authority to establish a maritime boundary. However, UNIFIL has maintained a Maritime Task Force (MTF) since 2006, which operates along the entire length of the Lebanese coastline and assists the Lebanese Navy in preventing the entry of unauthorized arms or other materials to Lebanon. The MTF was previously composed of six ships, one each from Bangladesh, Brazil, Germany, Greece, Indonesia, and Turkey, and was commanded by Brazil from 2011 to 2020. In December 2020, Brazil withdrew from the MTF. Germany subsequently assumed command of the force, which now comprises five vessels.

Debates over UNIFIL and U.S. Policy

U.S. Administrations have disagreed over the mission and size of UNIFIL. Some U.S. officials have described UNIFIL as a stabilizing presence in southern Lebanon, stating that Hezbollah strikes across the Blue Line have significantly decreased since UNSCR 1701 (2006) increased UNIFIL's troop ceiling from 2,000 to 15,000. A former U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon has noted that "UNIFIL's value in constraining Hezbollah comes down to its size. Through sheer numbers, it essentially saturates the south. Even if it can evade UNIFIL scrutiny at times, as the tunnels show, Hezbollah does not have the almost complete freedom of movement in the south that it enjoyed under 'old' UNIFIL."

In contrast, the Trump Administration asserted that UNIFIL "patrols and checkpoints are of plainly limited use when offending parties can simply hide weapons and tunnel entrances on so-called 'private property.'" The United States and Israel accused Hezbollah of hiding weapons in violation of UNSCR 1701, and pushed for the addition of language to UNIFIL's mandate that would allow UNIFIL to access and search private property for illicit Hezbollah weapons. Trump Administration officials criticized the government of Lebanon for not facilitating UNIFIL access to key sites, such as the Lebanese origin points of Hezbollah underground tunnels that cross into Israel.

In response to U.S. pressure, additional provisions were added to annual resolutions reauthorizing UNIFIL's mandate. In 2017, U.S. officials successfully advocated for language requiring UNIFIL to notify the Security Council whenever it encountered roadblocks or other obstacles; these incidents are now noted in regular U.N. Secretary-General reports on the implementation of UNSCR 1701. In 2019, the Security Council approved U.S.-proposed language calling for the Secretary-General to assess the effectiveness of UNIFIL; the resulting report highlighted several structural weaknesses. In August 2020 the Security Council voted to reauthorize UNIFIL but also reduced UNIFIL's maximum force strength from 15,000 to 13,000 troops. Then-U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Kelly Craft stated, "The reduction of the ceiling from 15,000 troops to 13,000 is an important step toward right-sizing a mission that has for years been over-resourced given the limits on its freedom of movement and access."

The Biden Administration's FY2022 budget request states

While UNIFIL has not been allowed full access to suspected tunnel sites and other areas of concern along the border demarcation as required by its mandate, the mission still serves a priority U.S. national security interest by maintaining security and stability between Israel and Lebanon. It also assists the Lebanese Government in extending its authority over southern Lebanon, which subsequently helps mitigate the ability of Hezbollah and other militias to launch attacks against Israel.

Recent Developments

A July 2021 U.N. Secretary-General report on the implementation of UNSCR 1701 noted continued violations of UNSCR 1701 by multiple parties. UNIFIL stated that it had not yet gained full access to several locations of interest, including some sites connected with Green Without Borders, a nongovernmental organization reportedly aligned with Hezbollah. UNIFIL also stated that individuals obstructed its efforts to install cameras inside UNIFIL positions along the Blue Line; the LAF requested time to address local concerns before UNIFIL proceeds with installation.

U.S. Funding

The United States provides assessed funding to UNIFIL through the Contributions for International Peacekeeping Activities (CIPA) account in annual State/Foreign Operations appropriations bills. In FY2021, the estimated U.S. UNIFIL assessment is \$144 million. The current U.S. peacekeeping assessment (including for UNIFIL) is 27.89%. Since the mid-1990s Congress has capped U.S. peacekeeping payments at 25%, leading to the accumulation of U.S. arrears (about \$1 billion since FY2017). The Administration's FY2022 budget request includes funds to begin repaying some of these arrears.

Outlook

The challenges facing the LAF stemming from Lebanon's ongoing economic crisis could put additional pressure on UNIFIL operations. The devaluation of the Lebanese lira and subsequent inflation have impacted LAF salaries, as well as its ability to buy foreign-made spare parts and other critical components. In mid-2021, LAF Commander Joseph Aoun stated, "If unmitigated, the economic and financial crisis will inevitably lead to the collapse of all state institutions including the LAF."

The breakdown of Lebanon's security forces could have broad domestic and regional implications, potentially reducing the ability of Lebanon's government to manage social unrest or maintain security along its borders with Israel and/or Syria. If economic and/or security conditions limit LAF deployments to the south, UNIFIL operations in border areas could face additional challenges. A 2020 U.N. Secretary-General assessment of UNIFIL (S/2020/473) stated that in some instances, the local population hindered UNIFIL patrols unless they were accompanied by the LAF. The U.N. assessment also stated that LAF deployments to the south had been delayed as the LAF focused on countering threats to border security stemming from the conflict in neighboring Syria, as well as crowd control functions following 2019 domestic protests.

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